



NEWSLETTER

Alicia DiMarco, Child Development Consultant

Dear Caregivers,

Happy October! I am so excited that it finally feels like fall weather. With Halloween approaching I wanted add tools to your tool belt regarding what is developmentally appropriate for preschoolers around spooky or scary things. It is important to keep in mind that in the preschool years children live in a world of magical thinking. It's what drives play and allows them to create and master complex topics, BUT it also causes them difficulty in determining what is reality and what is fantasy. It is important to remember that whatever your child says is scary is their experience, which is completely valid, even if you do not think it is scary and it doesn't seem logical. The logic centers of children's brains are still very immature. Having difficulty telling the difference between what is real and what is pretend can really affect their ability to enjoy spooky or scary things because it might feel really overwhelming for them and cause them to feel unsafe. Also, children are not always predictable so what seemed fine one day, might be frightening the next day. And yet, some kids love spooky and scary things and find startling things exciting. I hope you can use this newsletter as a guideline to help you navigate this spooky season! As always, I'm here to discuss any of your child development needs.

Let's talk development & scary/spooky things

To make an informed decision let's look at typical preschool development

- Emotional Readiness
 - Cognitively, preschool aged kids have a lot of **magical thinking**
 - This makes it difficult for preschoolers to differentiate between reality and fantasy
 - It's what makes their play rich but their logic underdeveloped
- Preschoolers might think that wearing a costume or scary mask changes them into that thing
 - They might think their costume changes their behavior into that character or change who they are
 - This can be both exciting and scary for kids. Some kids might be sensitive and scary/ spooky characters might make them feel unsafe in their body. This is because kids are still figuring out who they are and what is authentic to them.
- Children feel safe when they can see their grown-ups' eyes and face
 - From Mr. Rogers: masks make it difficult for children to read facial cues and make eye contact, which may lead them to feeling unsafe.

Watch your child's cues

Every kid is different, so here are some things to be curious about when determining what is appropriate for your kid

- Monitor their energy, body language, and what they talk about
 - Are they hiding behind you or are they actively engaged?
 - Do they look down, scream, or runaway from particular things or subjects?
 - Does their energy match the situation or are they overreactive or withdrawn?
 - Do certain things make them worried?
- Are they constantly talking about an event/subject/thing?
 - Do they seem stuck processing this thing? Is there a conclusion to their thought?
 - Example from school: "the fire alarm went off, made a loud sound, and the lights were flashing" and then they repeat this statement or something like it again and again without a conclusion
 - For young kids even making repeated sounds (like fire alarm sounds) or motions (like the fire alarm blinking light) could indicate that it's something they are stuck processing.

What to do as their caregiver-

- Take your cues from your child
 - As much as you might enjoy and want to share the wonders of Halloween and spooky things with your child, remember that your preschool child might not be ready because of the limitation of their brain development
 - If you have fond memories of Halloween, keep in mind that most of those come from our elementary school years
- Take their fears seriously
 - No matter how irrational or illogical, they are their experience and everyone's experience is valid
- Avoid saying "it's not scary" or "there's nothing to be afraid of"
 - Remember their experience is valid; this invalidates a child's perspective
 - Remember their cognitive abilities are still developing
- Use your loving relationship to give them child-sized exposure to scary things
 - Ask yourself- Does your child have the temperament and emotional regulation skills to handle masks, scary costumes, spooky characters and startling things?
 - As the parent, you are the expert on your child. Think about the places and people you might encounter around your Halloween celebrations. Plan how you will set good boundaries in these instances to protect your kid.
- Practice & Role-play & Discuss
 - Practice putting on masks and costumes and talk about how it makes you feel and if it's real or pretend.
 - Say things like: "I know I look like a witch but I'm still me" or "I can wear a mask or costume for pretend but I stay the same"
 - Role-play with another adult and say "even when you have that mask on, are you still you?"
 - This will give children the opportunity to practice being something for pretend but also ground them in the fact that it doesn't change who they are, which is where many kids are developmentally
 - Find examples in books & shows they're watching-
 - example "even when Daniel Tiger puts on a costume, he's still really Daniel, it doesn't change who he is."
 - Discuss
 - Talk about halloween decorations, displays, etc. as you see them. This can be done in the car, at the store, etc.
 - Say things like "do you think that's real or is it pretend?"
- Repair if you make a mistake
 - Repairing with your child is always an important thing.
 - Say things like "I didn't realize that this was too scary for you. I am responsible for keeping you safe and part of that is knowing what is appropriate for you. Next time I will check in with you to make sure you feel safe."
- Help when it seems like they are stuck processing an event/subject/ things
 - Safety is the most important thing for a child. They might need reassurance that they are safe, state it clearly.
 - Help complete the loop to make sure they have a conclusion and ultimately know they are safe
 - Say something like "Yes, the fire alarm went off and made a loud sound and the lights flashed AND THEN we went outside and teachers kept children all safe. You were safe and then you went back to playing."
 - For more tips on this read "The Whole Brain Child" by Dr. Daniel Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson PhD

Collective Wisdom from SYC teachers

- "Different kids have different comfort levels with spooky/scary things. Ask questions if you aren't sure where your kiddo stands. For example if you see a giant skeleton. 'Is that real? Is this pretend?'"
- "Assure kids who may be uncomfortable that they are safe. Don't feel the need to manage everything they see or are exposed to but rather let them know 'scary things really bother you but some people like them. I know we are safe and you don't have to like scary things.'"
- "Feelings about scary things can ebb and flow. Try to meet kids where they are. (This is especially true with kids in middle childhood. As they understand more they sometimes become more fearful.)"
- "When we as adults remember enjoying scary things as a kid, our memories often come from when we were in elementary school or older. We don't remember being 3 or 4 or 5, when we were still figuring out what was real and what was pretend."

Have any questions, comments or topic suggestions? Let's chat! e-mail me at alicia@syccolumbus.org.
Office hours: Tuesday 9:30-10:30 am, Wednesday 1-2pm or by appointment